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ABSTRACT

Richard W. Riley, Secretary of Education, provides his remarks concerning today's big-city schools and the new hopeful realism that is being created through building more community partnerships that want to turn low-performing schools around. The Secretary discusses the government's role in school construction and the need to increase after-school programs and community-school relationships. Concluding comments address government efforts in funding school improvement initiatives; undertaking community-wide approaches to preventing violence, decreasing drug use, and giving students healthier options about how to live their lives; and decreasing drop-out rates. (GR)

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Speeches and Testimony

Remarks as prepared for delivery by U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley

Full Service School-Community Collaboration Conference

March 26, 1999

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EF 005 332

Good afternoon. I have just come from speaking to thousands of science teachers and now I have to get my feet back on the ground with all of you. When you talk to science teachers you spend a lot of time talking about the new literacy of the 21st century which is so informed and shaped by the many, many new discoveries in the sciences.

I want to acknowledge several people in the room. With us today is my former Deputy Assistant Secretary Jennifer Davis. Jennifer was at my side for many years in many battles including our effort to make GOALS 2000 a reality. Eventually, I lost Jennifer to two men; her husband and Mayor Menino. Jennifer now heads the Boston 2:00 to 6:00 After-School Initiative and the people of Boston are lucky to have Jennifer in this important leadership role.

This is an exciting time for all of us to be working together o improve the education of our children. This really is the Education Era. The American people have made education one of their top priorities, and we are finally at a point where I think the Congress understands how much the American people care about improving education. I can tell you that it has taken a while to get to that point.

A few years ago, the Congress even wanted to eliminate my job. I remember at the time that the old country song, "I don't know whether to kill myself or go bowling" seemed to sum up my thinking about my situation. Fortunately, I think we are moving away from this "negative" way of thinking about public education and the role of the federal government.

Indeed, as I travel around the country to visit schools, and I visit about 60 or 70 a year I detect something much more positive. A few weeks ago, when I delivered my annual "State of American Education" speech, I invoked the words of the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, to describe this new emerging attitude. Niebuhr said we should look to the future with a realism that is mixed with hope.

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I think that really describes how we should look at our big-city schools today, indeed all of our nation's school. In city after city, I see a new hopeful realism, thanks to your efforts and the work of many others. We are building more community partnerships. We have a growing excitement about our after-school efforts. And there is a new willingness to help turn around low-performing schools by giving them the extra support they need.

People are recognizing what so many of you have recognized for years -- that our public schools really can be "centers of community" for entire neighborhoods. This is particularly important in some of our inner city neighborhoods where the public school is the only "anchor" that holds the community together.

I believe the concept of schools as "community-wide learning centers" is gaining support in new and unexpected quarters. Several weeks ago, I asked to meet with the leadership of the American Association of Retired Persons or the AARP. The AARP is one of the most powerful lobbying groups in Washington, D.C. Horace Deets, the Executive Director of the AARP, was genuinely excited by the work we are doing around the community school concept. I believe we have a new ally.

I am also pleased to tell you that American Institute of Architects has made the concept of "schools as centers of community" one of its top priorities.

At the federal level we have tried to encourage this concept in several ways. The Department has worked very hard to develop a series of significant publications to get the word and show case where community education is taking place. he most recent is entitled *A Guide to Continuous Improvement (CIM) for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (1999)*.

We also sponsored the National Symposium on School Design last October along with Vice-President Gore and the White Millennium Council. We brought together 300 educators, architects and community leaders to think about how we design the next generation of schools.

This is an important time to be thinking about good school design and the role of the community in the process. We are smack in the middle of the baby-boom echo, and schools all over this country are overcrowded and wearing out. This nation has to build 6,000 new schools and modernize thousands of others. This really should be the golden era of school design because the school buildings we build now will last for the next 40 or 50 years.

We made the case at this conference that educators and school boards have be much more open to reaching out to the entire community in the design and planning of our schools. Those schools districts that do this well really are seeing the direct benefit from this effort. They have come to realize that is the school is the community -- that the democratic aspirations of the community are lived daily by how people in the community come together to use the school as a community-wide "anchor."

We also made the case that school buildings need to be open to the community as much as possible; for after-school, for GED courses, for adult education and literacy classes, and the community service programs that are so vitally important. Schools that serve as true centers of the community make sure that this shared public space is accessible, day and night and all year around.

This school design conference was a very exciting venture. One direct result is a new $10 million budget request that we are making to the Congress to encourage community wide planning - to give education leaders the where-with-all so they can reach out to the entire community.

We believe that this initiative goes hand in hand with our efforts to increase after-school programs and to pass the President's school construction bill. The President has a proposal on the table that would help build, repair, or modernize thousands of schools, with half of the assistance going to the 100 school districts with the largest number of low-income children.

Now, some people say the federal government has no business getting into the school construction business. Yet these same folks think the federal government should help build prisons. I think we need prisons, but for goodness sake, if Uncle Sam can help build jails, he can help build public schools. Let's get our priorities straight.

Another high priority for all of us is our continuing efforts to increase after-school programs. We all worked very hard last year to put after-school initiatives on the national agenda. I believe we were very successful. Congress gave us $200 million, which along with matching funds ,will help us to create or expand 6,000 school based centers.

The demand, as you know, is overwhelming. The conferences that we have held across the country with the strong support of the Mott Foundation have simply been sold-out. I am prepared to give any Broadway producer my good advice on how to pack the house.

Last year's grant application process was the most competitive in the Department's history. We received almost 2,000 applications, requesting over $540 million in funding. This is why we are asking the Congress to increase it support to $600 million this year.

I also want to alert you to a new effort that we are starting with the Justice Department and HHS. Together, we are setting aside $95 million for something we call "Safe Schools/Healthy Students." This will be the largest interagency youth, drug and violence prevention effort that has ever been undertaken. We are contributing $60 million.

We seek to fund 50 school districts that are willing to take a comprehensive community-wide approach to preventing violence, decreasing drug use and giving young people healthier options about how to live their lives. I say that

for one very important reason.

Too many of our young people are growing up disconnected. I met with a group of State Attorney Generals yesterday to talk about our efforts to keep our schools safe and drug free. One of the points I stressed to them is the sheer number of young people who are out of school on any given day.

About 500,000 young people drop-out every year. In some big cities, 5% to 10% of the all students are truant on any given day. And a total of 3 million suspension of 10 days or more occur during the course of an average school year. My point here should be obvious. We have a lot of young people who are disconnected.

This sense of "disconnection" is deeper than many people realize and unfortunately it goes both ways. I was struck by a finding from a *Public Agenda* report from last year which indicated that over 60% of all adults view our young people in the negative.

This is not a finding we can dismiss or take lightly. We really have to work much harder to change how our society functions. We aren't going to do that on a Friday afternoon, but we can't ignore this disconnection either and assume that it will just fade away.

This is why your work to create more after-school opportunities and make our schools "centers of community " for all of our people are so important.

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[Return to Speeches and Testimony page] PREV ED HOME

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